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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: CLOSURE OF NEWSPAPER TEMA SYMPTOMATIC OF POOR STATE OF
PRESS FREEDOM

REF: 2009 Tirana 17

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE TREAT ACCORDINGLY

11. (SBU) Summary: Mero Baze, the publisher of the small circulation daily "Tema", announced in a January 23 editorial that "Tema" was closing. Baze said that for over one year, the newspaper had made a valiant effort to survive after being evicted from its premises in 2008; however he said he cannot continue under such conditions. A January 27 statement by Albania's four media organizations noted that the closing of "Tema" is disheartening to journalists. Other prominent journalists, however, said Baze's use of the paper to harshly criticize the government, after many years of staunch political and personal support for Prime Minister Berisha, cast aspersions over "Tema's" role and reputation. The truth is very likely a combination of both. In Albania, the "independent" media is more often than not little more than the public affairs arm of political parties and businesses, and practically all operate under the thumb of a political party or larger media company. Independent journalism in Albania is the exception, not the norm. End summary.

12. (SBU) On January 23, 376 days after its eviction from its previous offices by the GOA, the now anti-GOA small circulation daily paper "Tema" announced it would cease publishing immediately. "Tema", whose editor Mero Baze was once a close confidant of PM Sali Berisha, has had a rocky period since the GOA broke its lease with "Tema" in December 2008 and evicted it from its offices, purportedly to make way for a printing facility for the new biometric ID cards (reftel). (Note: The eviction occurred in defiance of a court ruling permitting "Tema" to remain in its original offices. The USG and European governments condemned the government's action publicly, including in the 2008 Human Rights Report. End note.) The break, according to several sources, occurred when Berisha backed down from an agreement negotiated by Baze to support business interests of the wealthy owner of Tirana's prime entertainment pavilion, the Taiwan Center. Several sources say that Baze was paid 500,000 euros to deliver a casino license but ultimately failed to do so. Taiwan Center owner Besnik Sula allegedly owns "Tema", according to documents provided by the Ministry of Finance.

13. (SBU) The eviction was only the beginning of Baze's woes. Just weeks after the eviction, Baze's car was burned and subsequently exploded (reftel). A police investigation determined the car had caught fire on its own, however the Albanian Helsinki Commission (AHC) said at the time the investigation was "hasty." More recently, in November 2009, Baze was assaulted in a Tirana bar by businessman Rezart Taci. Taci is currently free on bail pending a trial.

14. (SBU) Yet other prominent journalists tell a different story regarding "Tema's" closure. Opinion writer Fatos Lubonja, in speaking at a private event to DCMs resident in Tirana several weeks ago, said "Tema's" owners had important business interests. Other

journalists noted that the paper closed because it was losing money and no longer served the needs of the owners. Lubonja and other journalists criticized the beating of Baze, but are careful to distinguish "Tema" as a once pro-Berisha paper that turned anti-Berisha once the lucrative relationship was no longer productive. Opinion writer Blendi Kajsiu on January 29 said in an editorial that "Tema" had closed because it lacked a political party or business conglomerate to back it. Kajsiu called "Tema" "Albania's last independent paper" in that "Tema" was not under the thumb of the opposition, GOA or any larger business enterprise.

Comment

15. (SBU) The story of "Tema" is the story of Albanian journalism in microcosm - Baze used his close ties to the PM to his advantage to build the paper and to attract financial backers for "Tema" and, according to some, to enrich himself. Baze's relationship to Berisha dates back to the early 1990s when Baze was a Democratic Party loyalist and resolute critic of the Socialist Party, particularly its current leader Edi Rama. But "Tema" then suffered the consequences after Baze's falling out with Berisha. However, it would be a stretch to say that GOA harassment alone drove "Tema" out of business. Although Baze was one of the PM's harshest critics, the paper had a relatively small circulation. Almost no media outlets in Albania are truly independent, with nearly all of them answering to a party, business interest, or both. During TV debates in the run-up to the 2009 parliamentary elections, both PM Berisha and SP Chairman Edi Rama sent text messages to the on-air anchors of TV talk shows and debates, berating the hosts for showing perceived bias towards the other side. Both the opposition party and GOA consistently pressure media outlets to shade coverage and aren't above using leases and licenses as leverage. Many newspapers also take money from businesses in order to write articles critical of

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competitors. In short, "Tema's" closure puts a harsh spotlight on Albania's unhealthy media climate where politics, the media and business are inseparable partners.

WITHERS